



## Islamic Orthodoxy and Sufism in Sri Lanka

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**Abstract.** – Historic and ethnographic materials are used to examine the opposition between local Sufi and fundamentalist models of Muslim identity. Sufism is personified by the Moulana, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. Since 1914, a Moulana makes the rounds of Muslim villages to participate in an eight-day annual festival. He is thought to possess supernatural means for restoring social order and ensuring village prosperity. Members of the Tablighi Jama'at (a transnational Islamic orthodoxy movement) also visit Muslim villages. Their goal is to eradicate heretical practices such as the worship of the Moulana. Sufism is shown to connect villagers to supernatural funds of local and regionally constructed power; orthodoxy connects villagers to a global identity that supersedes the Sri Lankan national identity from which they are presently excluded. [*Sri Lanka, Muslims, identity, Islamic fundamentalism, Sufism, Tablighi Jama'at*]

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### 1 Introduction

What are Muslims like? We know they are not all the same and that there are distinctions between Shi'ites and Sunnis, but Islam has become too politicized. Shi'ites and Sunnis are discussed in terms of the political divisions in Iraq, Iran, or the Middle East. Muslims are associated with Islam and Islam with jihad and ultimately, inevitably, with a battle between “civilizations.” However, sympathetic, pragmatic, or dispassionate recent ac-

counts of Muslims make no mistake that we have depersonalized them and turned each one into a token of a type; the good Muslim views jihad as a personal battle against the devil and temptations, the bad Muslim understands jihad as a battle against the nonbelievers. This is pure rot.

In this article I want to describe how the Muslims in a small village in Sri Lanka deal with the pressures incurred by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and conserving their traditional, more heterodox Sufi beliefs. The battle is not one of good versus evil, but of two competing versions (or visions) of Islam. Villagers are not passive, nor afraid to voice their opinions, rather they choose, they weigh what is in their interest, and where their beliefs rest; they hedge, they choose, retract, and go on with their lives. This article is an account of one year (1980) when the traditional belief system, based on a Sufi belief in the supernatural power of the Prophet Muhammad's descendants, was for a year overthrown. To understand what happened that year one has to know the history of the village, global processes of its recent history, village personalities and concerns, and again local and global processes that have occurred since 1980. I will argue that what happened in 1980 was a result of the rise of orthodoxy in Sri Lanka, particularly as the impetus for this rise is a result of sponsorship of orthodoxy movements by wealthy South Asian and even Middle Eastern Islamic organizations. But what happened afterwards is also the local response to those pressures and an attempt to integrate the past with the present. How successful villagers are at this attempted integration is unknown, because it is a process. The conflicts discussed here

are a result of personal human failings and human greed and the villagers distrust in local level Muslim leaders. Nothing is simple, nothing is just about religious beliefs or political gains. Mostly what I want to do is portray the Muslims of this village as “human beings, just like the rest of us.”

One concern of this article is to trace the rise of Islamic fundamentalism at the local level, in a small village of 1,000 Muslims in south central Sri Lanka. For reasons that should be obvious I have tried to camouflage the whereabouts of the village, and hope to maintain, as much as possible, the anonymity of the village and its denizens. I do not know if the villager is a “typical” Muslim villager; but I suspect the people are “typical” Muslims, some more devout than others; mostly pragmatic folks who try to get through the days as best they can. However, all of them had to, and have to, deal with the issue of Islamic fundamentalism, either as it is foisted upon them by Islamicists who caravan from village to village espousing Islamic orthodoxy or by their fellow non-Muslim neighbors and citizens of Sri Lanka. I make a strong distinction between the meso- and macro-levels of national and global sociopolitical cultures and the micro level of individual lives. Not all politics is local, but the local is, obviously and necessarily, where the individual and the real (as opposed to “imagined”) group respond to the global. By Islamic fundamentalism, I mean the construction of an Islamic/Muslim identity based on a remembrance of a heroic Arabic past and an avowed ideological commitment to Islamic doctrinal practices and beliefs. However, describing an Islamic fundamentalist (“macro”) identity does not simply mean aggregating a list of normative beliefs and practices. Macroidentities, if they are to be accepted by and have motivational force for individuals, must have something to say – be useful – to individuals in the context of their real-life experiences. “Reality” is “relativized to context” and, therefore, interpretations of what it means to be a Muslim shifts with context (Quinn 1985: 294). In this sense, microidentities, constructed out of shared experiences, shape and influence the interpretation of macroidentities.

By providing an ethnographic account of Muslim contentions over what constitutes an Islamic/Muslim identity, I hope to show how identity can be differentially interpreted, manipulated, and contested, depending on context. That is, identities are “sites of unceasing struggle” in which the symbolic markers of identity are contested relative to their contrastive and oppositional contexts (Ismail 1995: 56). In the global context, Islamic/Muslim

identity is constructed in opposition to identities at similar levels of contrast (e.g., Christian, Western); at the Sri Lankan national level, Islamic/Muslim identity is contrasted with Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil Hindu identities; and at the local level an Islamic/Muslim identity is contested between Sufi and orthodox versions of that identity.<sup>1</sup> The boundary between these three conceptual levels becomes porous as individuals enter and are affected by national and global contexts and events.

In developing this argument, I will show how historical and contemporary processes at the global, national, and local levels impact on Muslim villagers in the Sri Lankan community of Kutali.<sup>2</sup> I will examine how nationalist and global process have led to the emergence of a new pan-Islamic fundamentalist identity that seeks, through its adherents, to subvert a more localized Sufi-Muslim identity and establish itself as the sole legitimate version of identity for both villagers and Sri Lankan Muslims. The contest between proponents of these two ideologies has produced schismatic divisions within the village.

In contrast to the Catholic community of Sri Lanka which, as Stirrat (1998) persuasively describes, has come to invoke ethnic over religious identity, Sri Lankan Muslims actively identify themselves as distinct from both the Tamil and Sinhala (and Burgher) communities on the basis of religious differences.<sup>3</sup> This is so despite internal discord among Muslims concerning what exactly constitutes the proper contents of a Muslim religious identity. The difference in marking identities between Catholic and Muslim communities is due, in part, to the ethnic-religious conflation of

1 Since the 1980s the dominant mode of reckoning Sri Lankan Muslim identity is religion, however, as Ismail (1995) has shown the saliency of identity markers is not immutable and has shifted from “race” to “language,” to “religion.”

2 Kutali is a pseudonym that I have used in other publications and continue to use both for obvious reasons and for the sake of continuity. Kutali is a Tamil word that means “friend” and reflects, in my imagination, the way I hope villagers and I view each other.

3 I use “Muslim” as an inclusive term and do not address minority ethnic Muslim groups, particularly the Malayan Muslims, partly because they are a very small minority within the Muslim community and partly out of lack of knowledge. The first Malays came in the 13th century and the largest contingent came as exiles from Indonesia in the 18th century. At the turn of the 20th century Malays formed 75% of the police force and 100% of the Colombo fire brigade (Thawfeeq 1972: 144 f.). However, since then the Malay community seems to have largely disintegrated as a cohesive entity mainly through intermarriage. There is a Ceylon Malay Research Organization headed by Mr. Murad Jayah.

the category “Muslim” whereas Tamil and Sinhala Catholics separate their hyphenated identities.

De Silva (1986), Spencer (1990), and I (1994) have each stated that Sri Lankan Muslims have “managed” to maintain a neutral stance in the ongoing “interethnic fratricide” between Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalas. This observation was based on the strategical pragmatics of Muslim ethnic politics grounded in their minority status vis-à-vis both the Sinhala and Tamil populations of Sri Lanka.<sup>4</sup> I (1994: 276) quote a Muslim villager who expressed this sentiment by stating that “in Tamil areas I am pro-Eelam, in Sinhalese areas I am pro-Sri Lanka.” The use of “Sri Lanka” is significant, for it denotes how ethnicity has come to be the dominant mode of defining the nation, and the exclusion of Muslims as part of the nation.<sup>5</sup> The statement also evinces the alacrity with which Muslims may switch allegiance depending on circumstances. However, in both the Sinhala and Tamil context, as described by the villager, the Muslim is defined as being in a subordinate and accommodating role in relation to the dominant other.

Unfortunately, reference to the accommodative policies of the Muslim elite connotes a unity within the Sri Lankan Muslim community that elides fundamental differences both between Eastern and Western Muslim elites and between Muslim elites and the Muslim peasantry and urban poor. For the Eastern Muslim elite, “managed neutrality” entails an accommodation with the Tamil majority; for the Western Muslim elite it entails an accommodation with the Sinhala majority; and for the villagers of Kutali, managed neutrality involves a consciously cynical and ad hoc accommodation to either the Tamil or Sinhala majority depending on the situation. In all three situations, “managed neutrality” is constructed not as an affirmation of identity but as a defensive reaction to their subordinate and minority status.

However, managing neutrality has become increasingly more difficult in light of the hundreds of east coast Muslims who have been killed and the thousands left homeless since the onset of the third phase of the civil war (Ismail 1995: 92). Attempts by the Tamil National Army also known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to gain the allegiance of north and east coast Muslims in their struggle to create a sovereign state have failed. The vast majority of Muslims seems to

support the People Alliance’s proposal for peace and blame the LTTE for starting this third stage of warfare. At the same time, the current resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism has led some Muslims to look past the current exclusionary image of nation to a pan-Islamic image of community.

Most Sri Lankan Muslims do not perceive themselves as full citizens of the Sri Lankan nation as presently formulated. Obeyesekere’s (1979) equation – “Sri Lanka = Sinhala = Buddhism” – retains its saliency in contemporary discourses on Sri Lankan nationalism. At the same time, Sri Lankan Muslims are divided as to what constitutes an “official” Muslim identity. On the one hand, there has been a strong South Asian Sufi tradition that retains its vigor, particularly among the urban poor and Muslim peasantry; on the other hand, Sri Lankan Muslims also identify themselves with the Arab world and seek to “remember” and affirm those connections in part through adherence to Islamic orthodoxy.

I will trace the rise of Islamic fundamentalism among Sri Lankan Muslims, a movement given momentum by their exclusion from the totalizing and intransigent conceptions of Sri Lankan Tamil and Sinhala identities. I will show how Muslim elites organize *jamatis* (meetings) to promote an Islamic identity that supersedes nation-state boundaries. Concomitantly, I will also describe a more “traditional” Sufi design for Muslim identity that is being undermined by leaders of Islamic orthodox movements.

The primary data were collected in the Sri Lankan community of Kutali, a village of approximately 1,000 Muslims located in the Moneragala District of the Uva Bintenne.<sup>6</sup> In excursions to other Muslim communities in the south, east, and west of Sri Lanka, I have witnessed similar debates between adherents of Islamic orthodoxy and Sufism. I believe that my accounts of the contest over identity in Kutali can be generalized and applied to Muslim communities throughout Sri Lanka and India.

## 2 Historical Overview of Sri Lankan Muslims and Kutali Village

Sri Lankan Muslims (or Moors) trace their history back to Arab and Persian traders who arrived along the South Indian and Sri Lankan coast in the 8th

<sup>4</sup> Muslims comprise only about 7% of the Sri Lankan population compared with 18% and 74% for Tamils and Sinhalese, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Obviously this also applies to the villager’s use of “Eelam.”

<sup>6</sup> The main period of my fieldwork was between June 1979 and February 1982, I returned for a month in 1992 and have remained in correspondence with villagers.

century.<sup>7</sup> The Buddhist kingdoms of Sri Lanka encouraged Arab merchants to remain through intermarriage and the transfer of *nindagam* (feudal) lands with the expectation that the merchants would increase overseas commerce (Arasaratnam 1964; Dale 1980).

In 1505, Muslims opposed the entrance of the Portuguese into Sri Lanka in part because the Portuguese posed a threat to their control over overseas trade. The Kotte King Bhuvanekabahu VII sought the allegiance of the Portuguese to gain the upper hand over his brother, Mayadunne, who ruled the Sitawaka kingdom. As a result, many Kotte Muslims fled to Sitawaka and when Sitawaka fell in 1593 they sought refuge in Kandy where they were welcomed by King Senarat. In 1617, King Senarat signed a peace treaty with the Portuguese in which he was initially urged to sever relations with Muslims. A compromise was reached by which the Muslims would be permitted to continue their trading activities as “friends” of the Kandyan kingdom.<sup>8</sup>

The Dutch also persecuted the Muslims and attempted to curtail their trading and retail activities by prohibiting them to travel to the western seaboard without first registering themselves. The Dutch prohibited Sri Lankan Muslims from buying property or possessing houses within the Fort and the Pettah merchant district of Colombo (Abayakoon 1976: 95 f.). Kandyan Muslims were supported by the king who relied on them for transporting local products and trading them for luxury goods and weapons. According to Goonewardena (1976: 139), “The Moors had a virtual monopoly (on internal trade). They supplied salt, cloth and dried fish to the Kandyan villages and in return bought areca nuts and certain surpluses in food provisions for sale in Dutch territory.”

In 1802, when the British arrived in Ceylon, trading opportunities increased for the Muslims. Muslims took advantage of the introduction of coffee plantations in 1820 by expanding the *tavalam* (bullock cart) trade, transporting supplies to and from the plantations. The Muslims supported the British against the Nayakkar dynasty that ruled Kandy. According to lore, Kepitipola, the leader

of the Welassa Rebellion against British rule, used the local *devale* (shrine for Buddhist deities) for a hiding place. A Muslim informed the British of Kepitipola’s hiding place and Muslims were instrumental in his eventual capture. Because of Muslim involvement in Kepitipola’s denouement, tensions arose between Sinhala and Muslims in the area and many Muslims from neighboring towns (e.g., Medagama and Bibile) fled to the relatively isolated community of Kutali. The increasing politicization of ethnicity was more evident at the national level.

In 1888, Ponnambalam Ramanathan read and published an article titled the “Ethnology of the Moors of Ceylon” in which he intended to demonstrate that Sri Lankan Muslims and Tamils shared the same cultural heritage and that Muslims were of Tamil descent and should, therefore, be identified as Tamil-Muslims. His claim – that Muslims were Tamil converts to Islam – infuriated the Muslim community. Through the leadership of M. C. Siddik Lebbe, a Kandyan attorney and journalist, and Arabi Pasha, exiled from Egypt to Ceylon by the British in 1883, the Sri Lankan Muslim elite and urban middle class, particularly in Colombo, united in their efforts to establish a distinct Arab-Muslim identity. Through their efforts, the first Muslim college, Zahira College, was established in 1892 in Colombo. The Sri Lankan Muslim elite began to claim and express their Islamic identity by learning Arabic, wearing “fez” caps and donning Arabic dress, including the veil for women. At this time, too, I. L. M. Abdul Azeez began the first Muslim newspaper, *The Muslim Friend* (Thawfeeq 1972: 134). As President of the Moors’ Union, founded in 1900, Abdul Azeez, fashioned a rebuttal to Ramanathan by claiming that the “Ceylon Moors” are descendants of Arab merchants who were, “. . . according to tradition, members of the family of Hashim . . . less war-like and given to the peaceful pursuit of trade” (cited in Ismail 1995: 69). As Ismail (69 f.) notes, Abdul Azeez is discursively constructing a Muslim identity based on racial ancestry, and a religious-economic affiliation with the Hashimites (the tribe of Muhammad) as peaceful immigrants involved in trade. This construction further served to differentiate Muslims from Tamils who, according to Sinhala populist constructions, entered the country as invaders. As Ismail (70) further observes, Azeez’s image of Muslim identity is patriarchal because it elides the Tamil wives originally married by the Arab merchants thus presuming that “. . . Arab men gave birth, by themselves, to the Sri Lankan Muslim social formation.” These efforts by the Muslim West-

7 “Moor” of course is a Portuguese term. I use “Muslim” because Sri Lankan Muslims refer to themselves as “Muslim” rather than “Moor.” There is also some evidence that pre-Islamic Arab traders arrived in Ceylon as early as the 6th century (Rachid 1976: 190).

8 C. R. de Silva (1996, personal communication) notes that a “compromise formula” was reached in which King Senarat “promised to be a friend of friends of the Portuguese and enemies of their enemies.”

ern elite to develop a dynamic and distinct Muslim-Islamic community paralleled ethnoreligious revivalist movements within the Tamil and Sinhala communities. The process of intraethnic consolidation also kindled interethnic discord and rivalry.

In 1915, Anagarika Dharmapala, wrote,

The Mohammedans, an alien people. By Shylockian methods they (muslims) became prosperous like Jews. The Sinhalese sons of the soil, whose ancestors for 2358 years had shed rivers of blood to keep the country free from alien invaders. The alien South Indian Mohammedan comes to Ceylon, sees the neglected villager without any experience in trade. And the result is that Mohammedan thrives and the son of soil goes to the wall" (quoted in Ranjit 2000).

Also in 1915, Sinhala-Muslim riots broke out when Muslims threw stones at Sinhala musicians during the Gampola Perhera. Sinhala reaction to this relatively minor incident was swift, organized, and violent. Throughout May and June of that year "groups of Sinhala men . . . attacked the property of Muslim traders and in some places destroyed mosques" (Ismail 1995: 82). The colonial government declared martial law and Buddhist leaders (among them D. S. Senanayake) were accused of inciting the riots. In the Ceylon Legislative Council, Ramanathan made a plea in defense of the Buddhist leaders arguing that a "grievous injustice" had been done to them (i.e., imprisonment). In this debate, the violence done to the Muslim communities became a side issue, overshadowed by criticism of British colonial rule. The message was not lost on the Muslim community: they had become the "far other" relative to both the Sri Lankan Tamil and Sinhala communities.

Since the turn of the century, the Sri Lankan Muslim urban elite and professional class have established newspapers, schools (*madrasas*), a Wakf Board to oversee mosque activities and organization, a Kathi court for adjudicating divorces, and cultural associations (e.g., Moors' Islamic Cultural Home). Except for the 1915 riots, the history of Muslims with Sinhala and Tamil communities can be characterized as one of accommodation, motivated in the contemporary context, by fear of being the target of state sponsored violence. However, such a (hi)story of Muslim identity omits the majority of Muslims who are neither traders nor professionals but agriculturalists.<sup>9</sup> The story of Ku-

tali, an "old" Muslim village, situated in a Sinhala-dominated region provides an alternative, perhaps metonymic, reading of how contemporary Muslim identities are locally formulated and contested.

The origins of Kutali are unclear. According to Adam Marikar, the retired trustee of the village Mosque, Kutali was founded by two Muslim merchants in the late 1700s. Adam Marikar told me the following story:

The Kandyan king's son had sculpted the face of the woman he intended to marry in a block of wood. The king displayed this carving and offered a reward to the person who found this girl. The two merchants, travelling by *tavalam*, saw a girl resembling the carving near Kutali. As a reward, the merchants were bestowed much of the land on which present-day Kutali is situated. One should note how this story parallels Muslim elite versions of Muslim identity as traders and as accommodating Sinhala rulers.

In contrast to neighboring Sinhala villages and hamlets, where the homes and small shops (*kadees*) are dispersed and where rice paddy fields lie adjacent to dwellings, Kutali is a nucleated village, with the paddy fields surrounding the dwellings and shops. Villagers noted that the village was consciously planned so that they could defend themselves against attack by neighboring Sinhala.<sup>10</sup> It must be added that relations between Kutali Muslims and their Sinhala neighbors are amicable and, in the collective memory of the villagers, there has been no threat or outbreak of interethnic violence. All villagers, however, fear and recognize the potential for an eruption of ethnic violence. The clusters of tightly packed dwellings surrounded by paddy fields provide them with a physical and psychological defense against such a potentiality.

In 1914, a Moulana (a Muslim who claims direct descent to the Prophet Muhammad) from Dikwela (near Matara in the southern tip of Sri Lanka), traveled to Kutali and to other Muslim villages in the south central interior on a personal campaign to revitalize Islamic practices among the Muslim peasantry. The Moulana, a merchant, began an annual village festival called the "Burdha Kandhoori" (sometimes spelled *kanthuri*). According to his great grandson, the present-day Moulana, the objective of the festival was to rid rural Muslims of Hindu and Buddhist practices that had filtered into

9 In 1911 the majority of Sri Lankan Muslims were "small farmers cultivating their own lands" (Denham 1912: 466, cited in Ismail 1995: 78). Samarasinghe and Dawood (1986) state that 35% of Muslims were agriculturalists and 28% traders in 1973 (cited in Ismail 1995: 78).

10 This was a "scripted" response provided by many villagers. Though this explanation may be accurate, the village plan is similar to that of other Muslim villages and may also be part of the Muslim "image" of the community as centered around mosque and business (e.g., Lynch 1974).

their religious customs. The present-day Moulana commented as follows:

My grandfather's father started this work in 1914. Earlier there was no Burdha Kandhoori . . . In those days there was no religion and people had no knowledge of the proper way of reciting prayers, so my grandfather would travel to twelve Muslim villages yearly and teach villagers the proper ways of worshipping. The villages, of which Kutali was one, would put on a feast to honor him . . . being a Moulana is like a caste . . . we are from the blood of the Prophet, no? My daughters must marry other Moulanas, but boys can marry anyone because the blood is passed through the patriline. However, even sons should marry the daughters of Moulana families; all my six sons did so. People respect me because I am of the blood of the Prophet and through me they worship Him.

Though this description frames this annual festival as an event wrought by an individual, it must also be seen as part of the larger historical process of ethnic revival occurring in Sri Lanka at the turn of the 20th century. The Burdha Kandhoori begins with the arrival of the Moulana and culminates in a large *kandhoori* (festival) on the eighth day, when he departs. Since 1914 the festival has continued unabated until 1980 when it was abruptly cancelled for one year. Amid turmoil and much debate it was recontinued in 1981. Villagers explained that the reason for the cancellation of the festival in 1980 was due to the trustee and other *marikars* (mosque administrators) pocketing funds collected before and during the festival.<sup>11</sup> The mosque trustee and his supporters argued that the cancellation was due to a drought that left the villagers unable to donate the requisite cash and foodstuffs necessary to hold the festival. However, there had been droughts in previous years and the festival had never been cancelled. Moreover, there are always allegations of corruption against the trustee and the *marikars*. While poverty and the perception of corruption are necessary conditions, they may not be sufficient conditions for the cancellation. Instead, I believe the inroads made by the Tablighi Jama'at to instill Islamic orthodoxy and eliminate Sufi practices and beliefs among Sri Lankan Muslims has caused villagers, particularly young and educated village

11 There are four *marikars* in the village, with one voted trustee, or head *marikar*. The position of *marikar* is traditionally hereditary, but in 1957 the Wakf Board that oversees all Sri Lankan mosques declared there should be open elections for the *marikar* and trustee posts every three years. In fact, the elections still follow along hereditary lines, thus the elder brother and father of the present trustee had been trustees prior to him.

leaders, to refute or question the legitimacy of the Burdha Kandhoori as an Islamic practice.

### 3 The Sufi Identity

Embedded in this sociopolitical history there has been a strong Sufi tradition that centers around devotional recitals (*maulid*) in honor of a saint (*wali* or sometimes called Andawer-“god”). Two of the most prominent saints in Sri Lanka (and elsewhere in South India and the Maldives) are Qutub Mohideen Abdul Qadir al Jilani, an Iraqi saint and scholar born in 1092, and Shahul Hamid Nagore Meeran Sahib, born in northern India in 1532.<sup>12</sup> Abdul Qadir is said to have come to Sri Lanka and meditated for eleven years at Dafter Jailani, situated 15 miles south of Balangoda.<sup>13</sup>

Annually, during the eleventh month of the Islamic calendar (Rabhi-ul-Akhir), there is a month-long *maulid* (anniversary celebration) for the saint at this site and shorter twelve-day *maulids* in Muslim communities.<sup>14</sup> I attended the *maulid* for the month in 1981, living and interacting with the thousands of Muslims who come on pilgrimage from Sri Lanka and India. Dafter Jailany is situated in the forest, approximately 2,500 feet above sea level. A number of Sufi “hermit” mystics (*murshids*), including a woman, had taken up permanent residence in the area.<sup>15</sup> During the festival month there are long lines of pilgrims desiring to receive the blessings of the *murshid*. A few of the *murshids* have devoted acolytes who care for them throughout the year. The mystics and the festival at Jailany are central to the construction of a Sufi identity. Kutali villagers identify themselves both as Sunnis and as members of the Qadariyah Tariqah (order or sect). Though there is no official *pir* or sheikh (leader) that organizes and maintains the sect as an active order, there are weekly Thursday evening *dikhr* (devotional) services held in honor of “Mohideen Andawer.” I observed similar services in Kalmunai (on the east coast) led by

12 Qutub is a Sufi title that means “axis” or “pole star” suggesting that devotees of the saint order their lives and devotions around his teachings.

13 This is, it should be noted, a legendary claim lacking (to my knowledge) historical evidence.

14 *Maulid* can be used both to refer to the anniversary or the recitals in behalf of the saints.

15 The woman mystic resided permanently in a spacious and well-kept two-room cave. She was approximately 30–35 years of age and attended to by a 50ish-year-old man who brought her food and water and regulated the traffic of pilgrims who came to her for advice. Within the Sufi tradition it is not unusual to have female saints or pirs.

a *pir* and attended by both women and men; the women were separated from the men by a curtain. During *dikhr* recitals some participants enter trance states that are explained as the individual entering a state of spiritual grace (*fana*) in which they are attuned to the spiritual vibrations of Allah.

Each night, at Jailany, there is a procession around the shrine (*dargah*) of the saint led by a group of *Rifa'i faqirs* (also referred to as *murids*). *Rifa'i* was an Iraqi 12th-century saint said to have followed in the “footsteps” of Mohideen Abdul Qadir. The *Rifa'i faqirs* are known by Sri Lankan Muslims for their ecstatic and extreme forms of devotional practices. Led by a *khalifa* (one of many titles for a leader of a Sufi order), the *faqirs* dance in elaborate military-like fashion and as the tambourine playing and chanting becomes ever more intense, slash and pierce themselves with swords, maces, and long sharp metal skewers. Members of the audience also participate.<sup>16</sup> These actions are intended both to reflect the faith of the *faqir*, or participant, and the sacred power of the saint.

It is precisely the sacred states of the saint and the supernatural power that can be harnessed by devotees that lies, as we shall see, at the center of the debate over the acceptable parameters of Muslim religious practices and beliefs. At both the Kalmunai and Dafter Jailany festivals there had been a small group of Muslims who handed out pamphlets and told interested bystanders that the worship of saints was a form of idolatry and, therefore, heresy (*haram*) according to the Shari'a (Islamic law). These Muslims were members of the Tablighi Jama'at (see later) and provide the alternative and, I will argue, emerging dominant view of Islamic identity that extends the boundaries of identity from a local to a global context.

A Sufi design for identity, as used here, is defined both by the worship of saints and by the social establishment of a tariqah (a Sufi order) constituted by a *pir* and his followers (*murid*). Though there is no *pir* in Kutali, there are weekly *dikhr* recitals – a Sufi practice in which the names of Allah are repetitively recited – devoted to the saint, and the Moulana serves as a *pir* during his stay. Similar to Hindu and Buddhist folk deities, the Saints, Mohideen and Shahul Hamid (among others), represent supernatural funds of power that

can be tapped for aid through devotional practices and offerings.

The village mosque (*pali*) is called the Mohideen *pali* and there is a small till box at the gate along the street where villagers can put coins in for vows (*muradi* or *barre*).<sup>17</sup> The *labbai* (a term villagers use to refer to the village “folk priest,”) or *waede mahatteya* (folk healer who specializes in snake bites) are called on by villagers, after the harvest or at critical times in their lives to offer vows and give a *narsi* (also called *pukka* or *dana* and refers to food offerings) for the saint.<sup>18</sup> Simply exclaiming “*Ya Mohideen*” suffices to enlist his aid in times of trouble. On a personal note, I had once taken an ill villager to the hospital in the middle of the night on my 1952 Java motorcycle. On our return, there had been a downpour and one of the causeways was flooded. The light of the motorcycle reflected against the water so that it looked like pavement. As we motored into the flood, my passenger screamed out “*Ya Mohideen*” and, knee-deep in water, we managed to extricate ourselves. The story made the rounds and was cited as proof of Mohideen's power and attentiveness to individuals in distress.

The role of saints pervades everyday life in Kutali. They are distinguished from *nabis* (prophets) or the *rasool* (the Prophet Muhammad) who, according to one *maulavi* (a Muslim trained at a *madrassa* in Islamic doctrine and Arabic), are “dead and gone having fulfilled their task but Allah gave the saints the power to intercede on our behalf.” The worship of saints is not confined to the exigencies of daily life but extends to devotional practices. The Thursday evening *dikhr* rites, performed in behalf of Mohideen are, in practice, a recital of the various names of Allah. The participants congregate, camphor incense is lighted,

16 On a personal note, the piercing of flesh is more intense and “extreme” than I have witnessed at the Kataragama festival or other Tamil and Buddhist rituals accompanied by piercing. To provide an example, one of the *faqirs*, a young man in his twenties, took what looked like a fencing sword and pierced his abdomen lengthwise with the point sticking out the other side.

17 *Muradi* is the Arabic term that is sometimes used for giving vows, more often villagers use the Sinhala term *barre*.

18 The offering of vows in Kutali, and the procedures that accompany the giving of vows, including the recital of mantras and the tying of amulets (*yantras*) for protection parallel Buddhist and Hindu customs. Probably because of the village's relative isolation from other Muslim enclaves and their close association with the surrounding Sinhala population, villagers use a mixture of Sinhala, Tamil, and Arabic colloquialisms to refer both to the ritual specialists and the procedure for offering vows. *Waede mahatteya* is, for example, a Sinhala term, but is used by all villagers to address and refer to the local “folk doctor.” Both the *labbai* and *waede mahatteya* statuses are traditionally inherited but they can also be achieved if someone is willing to undergo the fairly rigorous training necessary to perform these roles. In 1982 none of the sons of either the *waede mahatteya* or *labbai* were interested in becoming apprentices and their particular skills are likely to be lost.

and they proceed in unison to chant the various names of Allah with the intention of attaining inner harmony with the sacred (*fana*). Stories of the miracles and devotional practices of Mohideen and Shahul Hamid circulate among Muslims and are told, much as hadith stories about the life of the Prophet Muhammad, as instructive parables.

Specifically with regard to the offering of vows, saint worship among Sri Lankan Muslims is similar to Tamil and Sinhala folk practices directed towards deities. In both forms of worship, the saint or deity is perceived as a supernatural intercessor who can act in behalf of the community or individual who offers the vow. Small coins or small tin images are offered, a ritual specialist communicates the vow, and a food gift (*narsi* or *pukka*) is given by the supplicant. Muslims recognize the parallels but for those who believe in saints the categorical differences distinguish them from the Tamil and Sinhala populations. Much like Buddhist folk deities, saints are perceived as hybrid entities – half human / half supernatural – who, because of their human qualities, are conceptualized as a bridge to the realm of the sacred. As villagers say, they function as a sort of idealized government attending to the needs of the powerless (see Gilsenan 1982 for a similar account of saints in Lebanon).

The premiere village festival, however, is the Burdha Kandhoori. It occurs a month or so after the rice paddy harvest in April and May. A letter of invitation is sent by messenger to the Moulana in Dikwella sometime in January. He acknowledges the letter and informs the *marikars* of the date of his arrival. A month before he will arrive, the *marikars* convene and divide up the labor to prepare for the Burdha Kandhoori. Villagers are enlisted in cooperative labor teams to clean up the village, homes and shops are white-washed with lime, women make new colorful reed mats for the mosque, foodstuffs and donations are gathered in the village, and local leaders make the rounds to collect donations from Sinhala villagers and wealthy merchants in the region (including Sinhala shop owners). Stories of the miraculous power of the Moulana are told and retold.

Most villagers accept without question that the Moulana possesses supernatural power. But the source of his power, as the Moulana states, stems from his blood tie to the Prophet. Indeed, villagers perceive the Moulana as the symbolic embodiment of the Prophet. During the eight-day festival, the Moulana visits homes, charms water to heal the sick, resolves dowry and marriage problems and arbitrates various other disputes. He also has the

power to remove *marikars*, including the trustee, from office. During his stay in Kutali, he is the unquestioned religious leader of the village.

On the eighth, and final, day of the Burdha Kandhoori, approximately 2,000 Sinhalas and Muslims stream into the village. A loudspeaker is rented through which music is broadcast and donations are announced. In 1981, the Mosque Trustee estimated that more than one hundred chickens, twelve goats, and ten oxen were slaughtered. The street near the mosque is lined with petty entrepreneurs selling costume jewelry, silver and gold bracelets, brass pots, saris, sarongs, and other wares. Sinhalas and Muslims from the area arrive by bus, rented vans, private vehicles, bicycles, and on foot. A merry-go-round and swings are set up on the mosque grounds for the children. Guests and hosts, Muslims and Sinhalas, rich and poor, sit on the ground in groups of five eating from large metal *sabans* (bowls). The *sabans* are filled with rice, vegetable and meat curries. The five people around the *saban* dip their hands into the communal bowl and eat. After the feast, adults congregate in small groups chatting, watching the children play, and generally enjoying themselves. The women and children eat in the rice cooperative building across the street. Sinhalas and Muslims alike form a line, waiting to meet with the Moulana who will bless them or charm some water that they will store and drink only when they are ill. The general tenor of the day is one of communal harmony and camaraderie. While historically the Burdha Kandhoori had been intended to differentiate Muslim from Sinhala religious practices and ideology, on this day markers of religious-ethnic distinction are grounded against the figure of the Moulana.

After the feasting is over, the Moulana delivers a final benediction. In 1981 it went as follows:

O Allah, let our sins be forgiven for those who are here and for all villagers. All the people want to pray and I beseech you to help them pray. O Allah, we are very poor and uneducated, therefore, send us the means to become rich. O Allah, we want to die with lots of merit. O Allah, bless our request. O Allah, give us plenty of rain and good harvests, give many things to our village. O Allah, we hope for an abundance of rain and good paddy and *chena* [swidden] harvests. O Allah, we hope for better education and more comforts. O Allah, please grant our requests.<sup>19</sup>

This benediction is attuned to the specific needs of a Muslim peasantry. But Sinhala villagers are

19 I am indebted to A. "Singer" Muthulingam for this translation.



also present and treat the Moulana as a holy man. The ethnic-religious distinctions between Sinhala and Muslim peasantry are both muted and marked during this festival. There is, from my observations, no sense or expression of ethnic-religious discord but rather a sense of “collective effervescence” bringing both communities together in the presence of the embodiment of “the sacred.” Despite the evident syncretism of this festival, evident both in the reference to “merit” (*pin*) and to the charming of water with mantras, villagers view the proceedings as a symbolic display of the power and veracity of Islam. Whatever else the festival does and “means” it unites Muslims and Sinhals, legitimizing a socioreligious identity of historical depth and power. It unites them, too, because both, to paraphrase Radin (1957: 246), live in a “blaze of reality” where the whimsy of nature and health can only be controlled by enlisting sacred power.

It is during the annual *maulids* and the Burdha Kandhoori that village microidentities coalesce into a more encompassing collective identity. These microidentities are delineated at critical junctures in the lives of people: whenever a child is ill, at the start of the rice paddy season, at times of drought; when people go into the forests in search of food or material resources, etc. At these times, villagers remember Mohideen or Shahul Hamid (also known as Meera Saibo). In making a vow or simply calling out “*Ya Mohideen*” whenever they need protection or guidance, villagers are practicing and reflexively reproducing their personal and social habitus.<sup>20</sup>

Stories of the saints are told as instructive tales, much as Jataka tales of the Buddha are told by Sinhala villagers. There is no orchestration of microidentities, they are triggered as a consequence of everyday exigencies, hopes, and misfortunes. Villagers respond to these situations in similar fashion. The reiteration of these similar actions, interpreted and motivated by shared beliefs, provides the sociocultural elements for constructing and organizing more inclusive (macro-)identities. Through the participation in collective and scheduled rituals such as the Burdha Kandhoori,

20 Habitus is defined by Bourdieu as “the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations [that] produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus” (1977: 78). In other words, habitus are socially learned behavioral and cognitive dispositions internalized through socialization.

*maulids*, and weekly *dikhr* prayer, these elements are assembled and organized into a Sufi identity. The trustee, *marikars*, and the Moulana benefit from their respective roles in these rituals. Their position as leaders is made visible and concrete; the leaders gain prestige, and they have the opportunity to make money. The mosque and villagers provide money to the Moulana for his services, the trustee an annual stipend, and the *marikars* receive cash donations to hold the festival. It is in their interest to construct and to organize a macroidentity out of the shared experiences and common concerns of villagers.

There are village Muslims who are troubled by saint worship, the syncretism of Sufi practices, and the villagers’ idealization of the Moulana as the contemporary embodiment of the Prophet. In Kutali, these Muslims are mostly young (under thirty) and have been educated at high schools in towns on the east coast or in Badulla. They form a small but active group recruited by the Tablighi Jama’at. In 1979, 1981, and 1982 they were passive onlookers at the Burdha festival. They did not directly oppose the festival but they were instrumental in its cancellation in 1980 and in the construction of a new pan-Islamic identity that harbingers a return to orthodoxy and discredits the worship of saints and the recruitment of Sinhala *kattadis* and *bhikkus* for curing illnesses.

#### 4 Orthodox Muslim Identity

The Tablighi Jama’at was founded by Maulana Muhammed Ilyas in 1926 in the town of Mewat, near Delhi (Durrany 1993: 22). Ilyas was a Muslim reformer who campaigned for Muslims to abandon non-Islamic accretions; foremost among these was saint worship. Van der Veer (1992: 553) illustrates this point when he writes of the Tablighi Jama’at in Surat (a port town in Gujarat) that,

public confrontations on religious issues are carefully avoided. Nevertheless, some of their propaganda clearly stands against Sufism, as is well understood among both Sufis and non-Sufis. They do not concern themselves with Hindu participation or Hindu influence in Sufi practices. Their main theme is that Sufi conceptions of hereditary saintliness and saintly power are innovations (*bida’t*) that have led Muslims astray.

Van der Veer (1992: 549) refers to the Tablighi Jama’at as the “main Muslim opponent” to Sufism in Surat.<sup>21</sup> Durrany (1993: 147, 151) goes

21 In referring to the Tablighi Jama’at as an “opponent,” van

further by defining the Tablighi Jama'at as a fundamentalist movement whose members preach that "worldly constitutions and the government are imperfect and subject to change and corruption" and promotes "the establishment of an Islamic social order." These characterizations of the core goals of the Tablighi Jama'at accord with my own observations. The movement's followers oppose Sufi practices and imagine the establishment of a pan-Islamic identity that supersedes national boundaries.

The expressed goals of the Tablighi Jama'at platform are to reform and recruit Muslims into their movement. They are a religious and not a political movement. However, these goals have political, antinationalist consequences. By espousing that Muslims should be committed to a transnational "realm of Islam" (*dar al Islam*) and that "worldly constitutions and the governments are imperfect and subject to change and corruption" (Durrany 1993: 151), the Tablighi Jama'at provides Sri Lankan Muslims with a potent alternative identity to the Sri Lankan Sinhala Buddhist nationalism offered by the state. If religion is the dominant mode for defining identity in Sri Lanka, then the appeal of the Tablighi Jama'at is that it fashions an identity that supersedes nationalist Sinhala and Tamil discourses of identity.

It must be emphasized that the members of the Tablighi Jama'at are purposefully nonconfrontational in their opposition. Thus, during the Burdha Kandhoori and *maulids* for Mohideen and Shahul Hamid, village members of the Tablighi Jama'at did not express public disapproval, but their position is well-known by their silence and nonparticipation in these ceremonies. The Tablighi Jama'at claims to represent orthodox, "pure" Islam and, by implication, Sufi practices and beliefs are defined as impure accretions – "abominations" or "danger" to use Mary Douglas' (1966) terminology. This dichotomic conceptualization of Muslim identity has intensified debates within the Muslim community over what it means to be a genuine Muslim.

From 1914 to 1980 the Moulana was the unquestioned authority on Islam. In the nationalist fervor of the first half of the 20th century, religious-ethnic revival movements occurred within the framework of the nation, perhaps because the "framework" for the nation had not yet been properly formulated. The Burdha Kandhoori and Sufi practices of Sri Lankan Muslims are a pastiche of Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic practices and beliefs,

but from the point of view of the "ordinary" Muslim they serve as a distinctive socioreligious complex that confirms their own unique connections to funds of sacred power.

In rejecting this connection, the Tablighi Jama'at proposes an alternative, global prescription for what it means to be a Muslim: one that confers power through connection to a transnational Islamic identity. At the same time, such a rejection necessarily entails a concomitant rejection of local histories, dislocating villagers from their past. The past that is "significant" to the Tablighi Jama'at is not Sri Lankan or even South Asian but rather an Arabic past – the time of the Prophet and his companions. In referring to their activities, the *jamatis* (missions or meetings) state that they are imitating the devotional practices of the companions (*sahabah*) of the Prophet Muhammad. The symbols used by the *jamatis* to invoke their image of a Muslim identity are taken from Islamic events that connect Muslims crossculturally with a common cultural heritage.

The Tablighi Jama'at recruits members by organizing *jamatis* in Muslim communities throughout Sri Lanka (and elsewhere in South Asia). Three to four times a year, a group of five to ten Tablighi members visits Kutali for a few days. Typically, the members are professionals (retired judges, lawyers, businessmen) from Colombo who travel by car or van; they are always males. Occasionally, Tablighis include members from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. The international flavor of these *jamatis* and the high status of the members impress and, occasionally, irritate villagers. The village lacks a police department, post office, or medical facility. Except for the Moulana and the *jamatis*, no "important" people visit the village. The arrival of Muslims from Colombo and other countries symbolically expresses the villagers' affiliation with a national and international community. The intent of the Tablighi is not only to recruit villagers but to instill, visit by visit, an image of genuine, orthodox Islam that overwhelms the more localized identity formulated by the Moulana.

During their visits, the members of the Tablighi sleep on reed mats in the Mohideen mosque. During the day, much like Christian missionaries, they go door-to-door to lecture on Islam and the Tablighi. They make a special point of meeting with a congregation of women who, behind a curtain, listen to a Tablighi member exhort them to adhere to doctrinal Islam – to pray five times a day (*salat*) and practice *purdah*. In the evening, the Tablighis participate in prayers and deliver sermons, which are usually well-attended. Interspersed in the ser-

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der Veer conceptualizes this movement as a superorganic entity, analyzing it as an agent of change, or, in my borrowed terminology as a "design."

mon are repeated appeals to recruit villagers by asking them to stand up or raise their hands if they are willing to participate in locally organized *jamatis*. Despite the exhortations by the Tablighi leader, most villagers sit in uncomfortable silence. This is in stark contrast to typical meetings at the mosque where villagers are always boisterous.

This contrast came to the fore when, during a Tablighi visit, a poor elderly villager died. The *marikars* and other interested villagers adjourned secretly at the deceased's house to consider the funeral arrangements. The group decided to delay the funeral until after the Tablighi members left. They did not want the Tablighi members to see how poor and "backwards" the villagers were. The Moulana, on the other hand, is privy to "backstage" arenas and behavior. The difference in villagers' perceptions of the Tablighi Jama'at members as "outsiders" and the Moulana as "insider" is, I think, reflective of the difference between "local" and "global" knowledge. The relationship between the Moulana and the villagers is a localized relationship, built up over time in face-to-face meetings and dinners where villagers tell the Moulana of their problems and he seeks a religious solution for them. The Tablighi Jama'at are not concerned about developing this type of relationship. Their goal is to reform Muslim practices so that across Sri Lanka and the world these practices will be uniform. They have no interest in establishing local ties or learning local knowledge; their concerns are universalist rather than local.

Only a few villagers (approximately 10–20) were active members of the Tablighi Jama'at. However, these few were tremendously influential. There were four *maulavis* (Islamic scholars trained at Muslim schools, *madrasas*). The three youngest (between the ages of 18–25) were leaders of the local "branch" of the Tablighi Jama'at. The fourth was in his late thirties and was married to the trustee's sister and, although a supporter of the Tablighi Jama'at, took a less active role than did the other three *maulavis*. As *maulavis* and Tablighi Jama'at members, these three behaved as religious virtuosos: they attended and frequently led prayers; they did not swear and behaved modestly in public; and they gave sermons at the mosque, particularly during Jumma (Friday afternoon) services. They attempted to provide an example, through their behavior, of a new Muslim-Islamic identity.

After the Tablighi leaves, male villagers often gather at local shops (*kadees*) to exchange stories and jokes about the Tablighi. On one occasion, a man was telling the story of a Tablighi member who came to his house. He had seen him approach-

ing and had told his son to answer the door and tell the Tablighi member that he was not at home. The boy had gone to the door and said, "my father told me to tell you he is not at home." Just then, one of the young *maulavis* arrived and after the villagers had a good laugh, made a statement that it was a sin to disparage the Tablighi Jama'at and he reprimanded the villagers. Unlike typical shop debates, where villagers are quick to respond, the villagers were silent after the *maulavi's* comments. Their silence was not only due to their respect for the *maulavi* but out of their tacit recognition that the Tablighi Jama'at metonymically represents true Islam and that all criticism of the Tablighi is, by implication, a criticism of Islam and, therefore, heretical. The frequency of their visits, the missionary zeal of the Tablighi Jama'at members, and the effective silencing of public criticism seem to me to foreshadow the eventual replacement of a syncretic Sufi identity with a more "puritanical" Muslim identity. Since 1982, the Tablighi Jama'at has continued to recruit members and, in Sri Lanka, it has emerged as the largest Muslim reformist movement.<sup>22</sup>

In 1980, the Burdha Kandhoori was cancelled for the first time in the collective memory of the villagers. Charges of corruption were levied at the *marikars*, particularly the trustee. The trustee argued that they could not hold a grand village festival because of the drought. But in 1981 the festival was resumed largely because villagers believed that the drought was a consequence of their not holding the festival. The problem lies deeper than corruption and weather. In discussions with the Moulana in 1979 and 1981, he told me that other villages had recently cancelled the festival. In its historical context, the Burdha Kandhoori and the Moulana represent a distinct Sufi-Islamic identity that contrasts with Buddhism and marks religious and ethnic boundaries.

Today, the culturally relevant contrast is with the Tablighi Jama'at which provides a nationalist Islamic identity vis-à-vis Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms. The context has shifted from one that frames distinctions within localities to one that frames distinctions within and between nations. The cancellation of the Burdha Kandhoori in disparate communities suggests a gradual erosion of a community-based Sufi identity. The arrival of Tablighi Jama'at members by caravan into the

<sup>22</sup> Personal communication, A. A. Salaam. I do not have statistics on the number of members and I hope to do a more detailed study of the Tablighi Jama'at in near future.

community from outside, some from other countries, is intended to mirror the original historical spread of Islam. The representatives of the Tablighi Jama'at, their actions and preaching express an identity and a connection to a global community that is more powerful and inclusive than one that Sufism can offer. In a time of interethnic fratricide, when Muslims feel excluded from both Tamil and Sinhala nationalisms, the building of a powerful pan-Islamic identity that looks back to its own glorious past provides a solution to their dilemma.

## 5 Conclusion

In this article I traced some of the important historical developments that have led to the formation of Muslim identities in Sri Lanka. These identities recombine and change over time and space so that at best I have managed to describe two very general “designs” for Muslim identity. By conceptualizing identities as designs, I have emphasized how agents (i.e., the Moulana and the Tablighi Jama'at) design identities within local contexts. Agents do not operate in a historical and cultural vacuum; they do not create designs *ex nihilo*. Sri Lankan Muslims don't just decide to “buy” one or the other potential identities sold at the ideological marketplace. Identities are formulated by people out of shared experiences and symbols.

By virtue of their religious, cultural, and linguistic differences, Kutali Muslims distinguish themselves from neighboring Sinhala communities. However, historically the day-to-day lives of Muslims and Sinhalas in the area have been (and are) much the same; they share common travails and interests. Their lives revolve around the same quotidian and seasonal cycles. Malaria, tuberculosis, drought, birds, and other animals that can ruin their crops do not make ethnic distinctions. The commonality of experiences has led to historically companionable relations between the two communities. Muslims and Sinhalas visit each other, exchange labor. The Muslim *waede mahatteya* is called to cure snakebites by Sinhala families, while the Buddhist *kattadi* is summoned by villagers to cure various illnesses. Muslims set up shops during the annual festival at the nearby Bandara-Kataragama *devale* (a shrine for Buddhist folk deities). In short, ethnicity was historically muted as a salient symbol of difference in lieu of the commonalities of their experiences. This is not to say that enmities did not (and do not) exist but they were expressed in terms of interpersonal or interfamilial rather than interethnic disputes.

The Burdha Kandhoori originated within the national context of religious revivalism and the emergence of an independent nation-state. The parallels of Muslim and Sinhala Buddhist folk practices were ritually and conceptually untangled. The Moulana's genealogical tie to the Prophet Muhammad and his embodiment of Islamic funds of sacred power, the invocation of Muslim saints, the practice of *maulids*, and weekly *dikhr* rites offered Muslims their own effective and affective religious counterparts to Buddhist (and Hindu) ritual practices and beliefs.

The emergence of local ritual practices and identity discourses aimed at differentiating Muslims from Sinhalas in the early decades of the 20th century were not merely coincidental with national events. Claims of ethnic distinction were partly propelled by fears of assimilation. Ramanathan's assertion that Muslims are Tamil converts and his subsequent support of the Sinhalas during the Sinhala-Muslim riots of 1915 deepened divisions between these two communities (Mohan 1987: 21–23; Weerasooria 1971: 25).<sup>23</sup> The competition over trade between Sinhala and Muslim (coastal Moors) merchants coupled with the riots furthered the efforts by Muslim leaders, at the turn of the century, to create a Muslim identity. The Burdha Kandhoori, though a local development not directly motivated by events in Colombo and Kandy, was part of this national engagement of Muslims to shape a distinctive Muslim community.

The collective “reminders” of Sri Lankan history in modern ceremonies celebrating the nation do not include Muslims (Tennekoon 1988; Brow 1988). For Sri Lankan Muslims their memories of a heroic past are traced back to the time of the Prophet. The preachings of the members of the Tablighi Jama'at, the willingness of these rich and urbane Muslims to sleep in the mosque on reed mats recall the simple and pure religious life of the Prophet. In the identity politics of Sri Lanka local events and interests are now directly related to national and global events and interests. The Tablighi Jama'at, more than the Moulana, resonates with the villagers' expansion into a world beyond the village boundaries.

Ahmed (1988: 228) writes that nationalism “. . . has created ambiguity and tension among Muslims . . .” in India primarily because nationalism entails loyalty to the state and to a national culture that excludes Islam. Within the contemporary

<sup>23</sup> On August 11, 1915, Ramanathan stated in the legislative council that “. . . a great and grievous injustice has been done to the Sinhalese” (quoted in Mohan 1987: 23).

discourse on identity, Muslims have the option to accept the hegemonic ideology of the Sri Lankan state that reduces them to second-class citizens or, in the present context, to construct an identity that transcends the nation-state. A utopian, but less foreseeable, option is to do away with unitarian identity politics. For Sri Lankan Muslims, the Tablighi Jama'at offers them an alternative to Sri Lankan nationalism by involving them in a commemoration of their Islamic heritage and offering them full citizenship in a pan-Islamic transnational identity. It offers them a response to national level identitarian politics that does not mark them as the subordinate and minority group but, rather, as the dominant majority group. Despite the increasing prominence of Islamic "fundamentalism" in Sri Lanka, most Muslims are not "fundamentalists," but I would conjecture, seek inclusion in a nationalist identity that does not define them as the "far other."

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